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ABSTRACT

While freewriting is valuable for the beginning or basic writer, it embodies certain difficulties. Sufficient time and preparation are necessary to move from freewriting to the structured composition frequently required on course exit examinations. The student instructed by means of freewriting may later resent having to rewrite or edit. Some instructors see freewriting as a way of helping students to find and perfect a personal voice as a means of personal exploration; this exploration often turns to insincerity, and there is little positive carryover between such self-discovery and other writing. Freewriting can be of value only when students pass beyond it by opening themselves up to the skills of planning and editing, remembering that the personal voice is to be used for speaking with others on topics of mutual interest. (DF)

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PROBLEMS WITH FREEWRITING

Charles Piltch

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"Problems with Freewriting" (a paper presented at the 1979 CCCC)

Since this paper grew out of a question I raised in last year's session devoted to Freshman Composition as a Service Course, I would like to begin my questioning of the utility of freewriting by returning to that context. I would also like to identify my perspective. Though we are all engaged in teaching composition, some of us have more experience with and interest in the remedial level and some with the regular level; some of us have relative autonomy and others have to teach to externally imposed standards, enforced by a department, university or state competence exam. I would like to suggest that freewriting makes more sense at the remedial level and in an autonomous class than it does elsewhere.

I certainly do not wish to question the value of freewriting for the beginning writer or especially for the kind of basic writer Mina Shaugnessy has described so well. Freewriting is attractive to these students because it frees them from the terror of making mistakes or even of incurring any kind of judgment altogether. It allows them to become used to putting thoughts on paper and it may even make writing prove enjoyable and personally valuable. It eases them into composition, no mean feat and one inspiring our gratitude.

However, because freewriting is so initially attractive, it poses a danger. To dramatize this danger, let me contrast the freewriting experience with that of taking my department's exit exam from English 101, the regular composition course. A freewriting typically takes fifteen minutes, during which the student writes without ceasing. He does not plan what he is going to write; he has been given no subject and need not stick with any subject he chooses. IN fact, if he takes freewriting with the greatest seriousness, he may not try to communicate at all but transcribe interior monologue meaningless to someone else. He does not stop to read over or amend what he has written, and he is not supposed to worry or be self-conscious about his expression. After fifteen minutes the experience is over. The student now may or may not reread

his material; if the instructor reads it, he either will not comment or will be, as he should be, encouraging.

On the exam the student is asked to choose one of four subjects and to write a unified, cbherent and grammatical 400-word essay on it. He has two hours. A wise student will not start writing immediately but will give some thought to choosing and developing his subject; he will also edit his material after he has written it. The essay is going to be judged by three teachers, two of them strangers, and his passing is likely to depend on how they judge it.

Offcourse, in real life there need be no such brutal juxtaposition of freewriting and the exam, for one should appear at the student's entrance into the composition sequence and the other at his exit. Still, the student needs sufficient time to move, in Regina Hoover's words, "from freewriting to structured composition," and one semester may not be enough. There is also a danger that the initial experience may spoil the student for the exit exam. He may come to see freewriting as a lost Eden and resent having to work by the sweat of his brow. Moreover, the freewriting wasn't judged or was simply praised but the further the student goes from freewriting the more that praise is adulterated by criticism: the criticism is necessary for the student's improvement but he may yearn for the time when there wasn't any and when his naked prose didn't have to meet his own or anyone else's scrutiny.

In English 101 my students don't mind writing that much: they are taking a course called Writing and expect to do some. But some of them want to stay in the Eden of instinct: they balk at analyzing their writing, either through planning or through editing, particularly the latter. Some of them have to psych themselves up to write: they then want the experience to be over quickly and they don't wish to prolong it by rewriting. If we are not careful, the initial experience of freewriting may strengthen their belief that the actual writing is what

is essential and the planning and editing dispensible. Richard Beach, contrasting student revisers and nonrevisers, characterizes nonrevisers as feeling they're beating a dead horse, that revision is only cosmetic, that the rewrite will be worse because it will lose the original feeling, and that they only want to spend a short time on the essay anyway. The revisers all seem to be following Peter Elbow's procedures, proof that analytical and editing skills can be grafted onto freewriting, but the nonrevisers strike me as fixated at the level of freewriting. Maybe they don't know how to revise, but they also seem to think they don't need to. They must be made to recognize the inadequacies of freewriting and to wish to progress beyond it.

This strikes me, by the way, as just as true when freewriting is used for beginning an essay as when it's used for beginning a course. Freewriting at the start of an assignment overcomes writer's block and is useful for brainstorming or finding out what one knows or thinks on the topic. The danger is that the student may resent having to limit or structure his thinking, preferring the original plenitude to any logical selection from it.

But not every instructor confines freewriting to the beginning of the composition process and some stress its strengths over its shortcomings. Some see freewriting as a way of helping the student to find and perfect a personal voice, as a means of personal exploration. Ken MacCrorie's Uptaught begins with images of dissatisfied students rioting against an irrelevant curriculum, and, surely, what is more irrelevant than the standard composition topics, the emphasis on form over content? And what more relevant than plumbing the depths of one's authentic self? Freewriting can be a cathartic and exhilerating experience when used to discover and tell the truth about one's life. Unplanned ceaseless writing may tap the unconscious, get it on paper where we can face it. I suspect also that writing about our experience has an effect analogous to the one Walker Percy discussed in The Moviegoer, that of certifying it. And,

needless to say, what is so exciting for the writer is likely to be exciting for the reader as well.

I must admit, though, that it is too exciting for me. For one thing, I note from my reading of David Perkins and Lionel Trilling how slippery sincerity and authenticity are: the authentic keeps turning into the inauthentic. Trilling quotes Oscar Wilde: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth." My students' unmasking of themselves is suspect: they know they're supposed to find some shocking truth and they do.

Moreover, what has such presumed self-discovery to do with their other writing? There is no such thing as a long poem, said Edgar Poe. So freewriting and the lyric outburst are well adapted to each other, but the students may end up regarding the regular freshman theme the way Poe regarded the epic; they may see the formal constraints, the artificiality, of the theme as inimical to sincerity. After all, they identify the high they get from freewriting with its content and not with its exploration of language. Worse, a professorial priority on sincerity may be seen as justifying that lamest of all student responses to intellectual criticism: "But it's my opinion! Isn't it enough that I state my own opinion?" The personal voice must also be a public voice, and writing must ultimately be seen not as free but as having consequences. I wish to invoke the position that James Vopat took in last September's College English and also to recall last year's session. We may prefer that Freshman Comp be seen as a Liberal ARts rather than a "service" course, but the two are not mutually exclusive. In other college courses and elsewhere, student writing will be addressed to ideas and realities outside the self; it would be a disservice if these were allowed to pale beside the intenser joys of solipsism.

I hope I am not heralding a return to what MacCrorie calls Engfish.

At least, personal freewriting is alive. The student finds something he wants to say and then finds a way to say it. The personnal voice avoids canned prose. True, but as Vopat points out, there is a sameness to MacCrorie's student examples, and not surprisingly. It takes maturity and practice to develop a personal style; freewriting comes to have its own conventions of loose punctuation, a subversion of standard syntax and clotted metaphors. Without being told, beginning freewriters sometimes think they're supposed to write that way, else it won't look spontaneous.

I am instructed by an essay by David Siff about what he calls "nonsense writing" but which we would call freewriting. He contrasts one student's freewriting with that student's subsequent paraphrase of it in expository prose. Like a good New Critic, he prefers the poem to the paraphrase. The paraphrase strikes him as functionally illiterate and simpleminded but "the 'nonsense' paper...points not to intellectual underdevelopment but to a sort of complex, allusive thinking that an ordinary freshman writing course, with its heavy emphasis on linear rationality, would seriously interfere with." Perhaps, but I suggest Siff responded in a traditional way to the paraphrase but that he brought to the freewriting all the tools of New Critical explication. The fracturing of syntax that is a vice in the paraphrase allows for wonders of association in the freewriting. There may be such a thing as carrying respect for student writing too far, for even the most unreadable Dylan Thomas sonnet used to look good after we'd spent hours explicating it, and Siff's despair that the student will never write as well as he does in freewriting worries me. The student needs to learn a serviceable prose.

There is irony in that freewriting, which some students think of as inartificial, strikes me as potentially closer to creative writing than to functional transparent prose. Some of you may see that as by no means a fault in it, and if you have the desire and the autonomy to make your

composition course into a prelude to creative writing, you may of course do so. But even creative writers fall into the camps of the revisers and the nonrevisers, and there is probably one Flaubert for every D.H. Lawrence. As for the course that I have to, and to some extent wish to, teach, I think freewriting can only have value if the students pass beyond it, retaining hopefully their initial zest and courage, their readiness to engage their feelings and personalities in writing when it is appropriate to do so, but opening themselves to the skills of planning and editing and remembering that the personal voice is used to speak with others on topics of mutual interest. As with geometry, there is no royal road to composition, but even if the only exit exam at the end is that posed by other teachers and employers, freewriting can only encourage students to enter upon the road and stride down it confidently. Other means must see them onward.

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